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AN IMPORTANT NOTE

BY

ROBERT BRIDGES

THE CHAPBOOK

(A MONTHLY MISCELLANY)

Number 19 . . . January 1921

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LONDON : The Poetry Bookshop, 35 Devonshire Street, W.C.1

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I

When Autumn's Fruit

WHEN Autumn's fruit is packed and stored,
And barns are full of corn and grain ;
When leaves come tumbling down to earth,
Shot down by wind or drops of rain :
Then up the road we'll whistling go,
And, with a heart that's merry,
We'll rob the squirrel of a nut,
Or blackbird of a berry.

When Winter's bare and cold for all,
Save lovers with their spawny eyes,
And, like a horse that fleas annoy,
We stamp, to make our spirits rise :
Then out of doors we'll whistling go
And, with a heart that's merry,
We'll feed—while richer squirrels sleep—
The birds that have no berry.

II

Now that the Tears

NOW that the tears of love have reached
Their floodtime in my throat,
What thoughts I launch for your dear sake,
What dreams I set afloat !
How, when I've caught you fast asleep,
I'll sit awake and trace
The curved and round perfections in
Your head, your neck, and face.

And if there's such a passion now,
With so much strength to move,
What shall I do if you inflame
With jealousy that love :
That jealousy, whose eyes can see
More than the deaf and dumb,
And hears far more than one that's blind—
What then shall we become ?

III

Dark Oracles

ONE carbon light in a triple chandelier,
Fly-specked and tarnished, lit the orderly room,
Bare but for two or three books and a straight-backed chair
Beside the green-baize table. The wind blew strong,
Bitter and damp from the west, rattling the windows,
And whirling up fog from the ocean across two miles
Of sand and scattered houses. Cold and musty,
Dismal, half-dark—and here, alive on the bed,
The man I was looking for. A defiant face,
Lined, hard, and grim, and keen of beak and eye,
Blue-nosed, thin-jowled, lean-cheeked, thrust into me
Dagger inquiries—
"I heard you were here," said I;
"I saw you at Cornell; you didn't know me;
I thought perhaps you'd——" Oh, confound the words.
"I'm damned if I care who you are," he rasped,
"Sit down if you want to. I can't throw you out."
And this was Ragan I was talking to,
The myth of seven universities,
The shark who filched all laurels from their schools,
Coming by stealth, departing like a wraith,
Testing all subjects, stopping for no degree,
Devouring knowledge like a prairie fire,
Preparing notes for many hundred theses,
Grasping the matter, and having searched the well
Flinging on, insatiate. Ragan, who mad with rage,
At finding the end of one more occult moon-glade
And still no solace, sought the earth's arch-comfort,
Drank himself to the ditches—and up again,
Freshened, a man once more, took up his quest

To find the infinite in finite things.
So was he in his youth ; and as the years
Came narrower circling, and on his temples gray
Brought a grim threat, he labored longer hours,
Sought out new vistas, old philosophies
Recondite and beyond a western ken,
And seeking thus, slipped out beyond the verge
Of our horizon, into other schools
And other lands where griefs as old as time
Live manifest in grave millennial ways.
But when we saw him in our student years
He was a ghost that passed unspoken to
Through halls of happy, careless sophomores,
Sunk-eyed, ascetic, close-cropped like a convict,
Light of step, firm-chinned, and in his face a fire
As one who has sworn to hunt his pearl of price
As deep as the nether pit.

" I'll tell you this,
I've tracked the gleam until it's broken me !
I can't go on ; I'll die here in the refuse
With the other shotten sweepings of the city—
And that's the pot of pitch at the end of my rainbow.
I might have had a life like any man's,
Lived soft, loved easily, brought up some kids,
And in the end been just as far along
And known as much. I wanted to settle something.
' Who are these little men, and what are they for ? '
I was curious. ' There's motion in this star dust ;
Something is crawling about. Come, let us examine.'
And so I did. D'you want to know what I found ?
Surface, plane, layer, covering hidden darkness,
Means but no end, machinery, vehicles,
Mediums for transmission, aids, improvements,
Inventions, ingenuities, all varied,
And leading whence to whither—a world of puzzles—

Order, action, custom, facet-forms,
Shifting appearances—and at the core
The same blind worm that's man to weave the web."
He raised his voice to a wild ironical sing-song
And gripped the iron bed with one red-knobbed
And bony hand. " Little man, seeking beauty and truth,
And every paltry question is his answer,
Final, ultimate—till the wrenching years
Wring the husk dry—and straight he is fooled again.
Religion is empty ; he gulps philosophy ;
Philosophy proves wind ; but science is elixir—
Fresh crater fumes, fresh Delphi, fresh Apollo—
A new undreamed of answer, unlike preceding
Shadows that danced before his fathers' faces
Shallow as place and time ! And when it all fails
He sets up death to worship ; death is solid,
Final, beautiful, wise. It's a long, damned lie,
And death's the flattest travesty of all,
Man's shadow of himself, thrown vague and monstrous
Upon a screen of fears ! Shadow of shadows ;
We are nothing, nothing—and death the obverse of nothing!"

He threw himself back on the pillow ; and I groped a way
Down the soggy, mouldy stair to the open weather,
To look out on the windy, lighted streets
And the fog blowing in ; thinking of days
That come and go, of years miraculously
Our own to take until we are spent in the end,
And musing : It must be he asked too much ;
He went like Alexander, conquering,
Tired himself out with rifling petty kingdoms
Of shards and trifles, desired a blazoned law
Enscrolled across the high heavens in crimson and gold—
And found the earth was dust. Dust let it be,
And rest content with humbler questionings,
Rich in little demand, asking but sky

And sun on the grass, and rain across blown water
Grey with storm, and the suns' processionals :
What ignorance can rob us of keen dawns
Or the straight lines of cloud across the hills ?
Who can take April from us while we live,
Or the beauty of human faces, human ways ?
Shall we go mad because we are not gods ?

IV

Epigrams

A VOICE FROM THE LOOM.

How many nights, how many days, O Earth, shall I be a shuttle shot across your meadows and through your hills weaving the pleasure of unknown destinies ? But this question it is not given you to answer, nor even to tell me whether I may rest in the end beyond the clangor of trains and clatter of pavements. I would there were a god that I might pray a final recompense of quiet ; to be buried on a high mountain, or under the sea.

COMPOST

As I searched my mind for words that might epitomize these daily papers—yellow, crawling, foul with filth—surely it was fortune put in my way the advertisement of an honest man in a needed trade : Manure delivered by car or wagon load ; we pay for garbage.

GRAYBEARD DAYS

The cries of newsboys are monotonous from the street to-night trailing through open windows into the alcoves among the stacks of books. They call the wares of to-day, as the quiet bindings cry out for all the yesterdays. Choose what you will have, for indeed it is all one.

PROHIBITION

It is useless to argue further on this matter, dear Chorion ; let us have no more words, but drink. I heard a philosopher yesterday who said we are dust, and there is no Hades. Give me then the stone bottle, or I must fight for it in the name of all the gods ; for when my brain steadies I am grown an unbeliever.

ALONE

You think that you are near me, little one—lying on my shoulder, comforted. But there is a gulf between us two, alas, and between all others, deeper and darker than the abyss that holds the evening from the morning star.

LADY OF MELITA

Lady of Melita, thou who seekest the cool of the morning, and with laved limbs runnest races with the hurrying sea, there is no suborned dungeon cooler than thou art, neither will any tears or pleading bring from thee grace.

SHADOW OF YOUTH

When I was young I saw on the streets only young faces, faces of lovers and maidens ; and now that I am old I see them only still. For we who walk so steadily weighed with years are shadows of those lads we were upon a time, drunken with a great lack of birthdays.

EVOLUTION

Now that I am sunk under the sea, a tall and ancient city built of steel and stone, those within my walls are no longer men, but fishes ; yet the change is well enough.

AT THE COPY DESK

What is this you bring me typewritten and purporting to tell the marriage of Agathas and Demo ? Silks and ices, and a wasteful throwing of polished rice—is this then the stuff of weddings ? However, nobody will read it but the bridesmaids, and they know no better. To press with it, and in haste ! Copy, boy, copy !

THE BAYONET

Do not struggle, dear friend, O do not try to rise. See, the shaft is broken sharp off in your breast ; wait a little ; lie still and wait for the surgeon while I put this water to your lips. O, dear friend, be quiet ; your hands are bleeding from the edge.

ERINNE

It was my misfortune that a king should love me, but as for me, I loved Nicanor only. Looped purple hung about the bed of Creon, the tyrant, and I slept a prisoner ; but if you are by any chance a person of this city do not slur my son who reigns, for I was truer than my desire. And now is Nicanor dust, and Creon ; yes, I, the first Erinne of Thebes sleep in quiet, and all others likewise, courtiers and slaves, who shared love in our morning.

V

The Organ Donkey

UNHEEDED on the City street,
With long ears closely folded in,
Grey stone before, behind the din
Of music, resonant, un-sweet,
Where sunlight strikes the sleepy roofs,
And carts go past with morning fare,
All sadly strange and unaware,
He stands on patient, dusty hoofs,
His glazed eyes stare into the sun,
Through shaggy brows they mutely stare
Across the noisy street to where
The little, unschooled children run,
As though he dreamed of goodlier fields
And pastures green where springs are sweet,
His glazed eyes stare into the street,
And blink behind their leathern shields,
While carts go past with plenteous freight,
And still on crude, unlovely key
The handle spells the " Rosary,"
With long mellifluous taunts at fate,
Unheeded in his harness bands,
With grey ears closely folded in,
Unloved, supremely wise and thin,
Misunderstood, the donkey stands.

VI

Whim

WHEN trout swim down Great Ormond Street,
And sea-gulls cry above them lightly,
And hawthorns heave cold flagstones up
To blossom whitely

Against old walls of houses there,
Gustily shaking out in moonlight
Their country sweetness on sweet air ;
And in the sunlight

Along the margin of that water
Children dip white feet and shout,
Casting nets in the braided water
To catch the trout :

Then I shall hold my breath and die,
Swearing I never loved you : no,
" You were not lovely," I shall cry,
" I never loved you so."

VII

Portrait by a Neighbour

BEFORE she has her floor swept
Or her dishes done,
Any day you'll find her
A-sunning in the sun.

It's long after midnight
Her key's in the lock,
And you never see her chimney smoke
Till past ten o'clock.

She digs in her garden
With a shovel and a spoon,
She weeds her lazy lettuce
By the light of the moon,

She walks up the walk
Like a woman in a dream,
She forgets she borrowed butter
And pays you back cream.

Her lawn looks like a meadow,
And if she mows the place
She leaves the clover standing
And the Queen Anne's lace.

VIII

The Pear Tree

IN this squalid, dirty dooryard,
  Where the chickens scratch and run,
White, incredible, the pear tree
  Stands apart and takes the sun,

Mindful of the eyes upon it,
  Vain of its new holiness,
Like the waste-man's little daughter
In her first communion dress.

IX

The Curse

OH, lay my ashes on the wind
That blows across the sea,
And I shall meet a fisherman
Out of Capri,

And he will say, seeing me,
"What a strange thing—
Like a fish's scale, or a
Butterfly's wing!"

Oh, lay my ashes on the wind
That blows away the fog,
And I shall meet a farmer-boy
Leaping through the bog,

And he will say, seeing me,
"What a strange thing—
Like a peat-ash, or a
Butterfly's wing!"

And I shall blow to your house
And sucked against the pane,
See you take your sewing up
And lay it down again,

And you will say, seeing me,
"What a strange thing—
Like a plum-petal, or a
Butterfly's wing!"

And none at all will know me,
That knew me well before,
But I will settle at the root
That grows about your door,

And fishermen and farmers
May see me and forget,
But I'll be a bitter berry in your
Brewing yet !

X

Love Letter

". . . THE country here is beautiful with flowers
Beyond my telling. Miriam and I
Have got the Goncourt Memoirs, and we lie
Under the lilacs, on the grass, for hours,
Reading the book."
O, the impertinence !
These minxes live without their lovers there
To see them in the act. What right have they
To own a separate happiness ? how dare
To read a book their lovers have not read ?
And Goncourt too—she can't appreciate
Without intelligent help. Why can't she wait ?
She ought to vanish, disappear, be dead,
When I, like Bishop Berkeley, close my eyes.
Monstrous, these feminine infidelities !

XI

The Toll-Gate House*

THE toll-gate's gone, but still stands lone,
In the dip of the hill, the house of stone,
And over the roof in the branching pine
The great owl sits in the white moonshine.
An old man lives, and lonely, there
His windows yet on the cross-roads stare,
And on Michaelmas night in all the years
A galloping far and faint he hears. . . .
His casement open wide he flings
With " Who goes there," and a lantern swings. . . .
But never more in the dim moonbeam
Than a cloak and a plume and the silver gleam
Of passing spurs in the night can he see,
For the toll-gate's gone, and the road is free.

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XII

Portia's Housekeeping*

WE are thrifty of joy in this our modern house ;
We probe the springs of joy with uneasy rods,
And shadow the worm in every thrilling bud.
Virtue we know will walk in seedy rags
Of knavery when the better humour fails ;
And we know the good man's shadow of desire.

It was not so with Portia. She was simple,
Plain for clear yes or no and good or bad.
Bassanio at Belmont in the evening,
Walking the terrace with Antonio
Was a good man with his friend, and that was all,
Save that his lips were young and masterful.
She had no fine philosophy of sin ;
You lied, and that was bad. You gave your word,
And, when time came, redeemed it. A treasure kept
At another's cost was ashes in your hand.
She liked her roses red, her lilies white,
And counted punctual hours in guests a virtue.
Sometimes she thought of a Jew and a young doctor
Standing before the majesty of Venice,
And smiled, without approval, then again
To sow the asters or feed guinea-fowl.
Gratiano, finding ever new Nerissas
Among her maids, she told not to be tedious,
And Gratiano said she was growing dull.
She liked the verse Lorenzo took to writing,
And made some tunes herself upon the lute
To fit a little moonlight sequence. When

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Launcelot Gobbo stole a goose at Christmas,
She did not say he was an honest fellow,
But rated him, and almost sent him off ;
He didn't brag about it to his fellows.
She had two children, and said two were enough,
And loved them. She believed there was a God
With an impatient ear for casuistry.
Bassanio had no regrets, but some
Agreed with Gratiano. I do not know.
In Belmont was a lady richly left ?

XIII

A Note by Mr. Robert Bridges

(*"On Satan's Chamberlains High-seated in Berlin"*)

PERHAPS the Poetry Bookshop may hospitably shelter a note that I am constrained to publish concerning one of my own poems: for its literary purpose supersedes the occasion which has provoked it.

When *The Times* (October 18th) condemned the Oxford letter to the German and Austrian Professors, the denunciation gradually came to be directed against me; and when I replied (October 27th), my opponent shuffled off, and thought to discredit my arguments by quoting a sonnet which I had written against the Germans during the war, alleging that my present attitude was inconsistent with that, and *ergo* untrustworthy. I could only be gratified to see that I had driven him to such an irrelevant and futile evasion as to find fault with me for being bellicose during the war, and peacemaking during peace. It would plainly have suited him so much better if he had been able to accuse me of having been a weak pacifist throughout, who had never felt any patriotic emotion hot as his. None the less, the language of the sonnet quoted against me might be held to be inexcusably extravagant, if its history were forgotten or unknown, and I hope that the following explanation may not be too long for your magazine.

The sonnet in question (which is on page 39 of my *October, and Other Poems:* Heinemann, 1920) was written solely for the purpose of preventing any ill-treatment of the German prisoners in England.

It will be remembered that, owing to accounts in the newspapers of the ill-treatment of English prisoners in Germany, there arose a cry in this country for retaliation on our German prisoners. When a minister of the Crown spoke dubiously in the House of Commons on the expediency of such retaliation,

The Times printed a letter of mine denouncing his hesitancy. The cry subsided, but there was a recrudescence of the vendetta feeling later, and it was then that I sent the said sonnet to *The Times*, November 4th, 1918.

In those verses I asserted or implied : (1) That ill-treatment of prisoners was a part of the Prussian war policy ; (2) that no one in Germany protested against it—though, if it were the recognised practice, they must be aware of it ; and (3) that they hoped it would provoke us to similar barbarities, so that we might thus fall to the level of their own frightfulness : and I believed all that.

It is plain that the second and third charges fall unless the first be true ; and it was not true. Yet I believed it, and even if I had not believed it, I was seeking to persuade those who did believe it and I might have been so far justified in assuming it ; but I did myself believe it, having been misled, as most of us were, by the newspapers. But since the war we have read many narrations written by the prisoners themselves—I need cite only one, the book entitled *Comrades in Captivity*—from which I learnt that the Prussian regulations set each prison-camp in charge of a special commandant, who had a free hand to manage the prisoners as he would, being responsible to headquarters only for their safe-keeping. The inevitable result of such a bad system was that where the commandant was a brute the treatment was brutal ; and the reports of such cases which reached us were absolutely true : but the whole truth was that they were exceptional cases. That book (*Comrades in Captivity*) gave me the impression that the prisoners were often, and even generally, treated as well as we could expect ; and that, considering their extremely insubordinate conduct, they met with more generous good-natured tolerance than German prisoners would have got from a baited Englishman. I am far from blaming our men for the light-heartedness which kept them alive ; it was the insuperable ebullition of the spirit which won the war, and might rather be a theme for national pride and exultation—but it cannot be denied that it made tolerable conditions more difficult to provide, and that the Germans were much "better" prisoners than our men were.

Now, though it still remains true that our countrymen, owing to the personal savagery of their keepers, were sometimes treated with an inhuman cruelty which cannot be condoned, and that there was happily no possible similar instance of such barbarity in England, yet it is plain that I went too far in my accusation. And that being so, I am not ashamed of retracting my words, and expressing sorrow for having written them : and I can see that as I was misled by the English press, so the Germans probably were by their own ; and that they have the same excuse for some of their ill-feeling as I have for mine.

It seems to me that this sonnet is a fair example of the " animosities " regretted in the Oxford letter. I willingly offer it to the Germans as a discarded animosity in exchange for one of theirs.

ROBERT BRIDGES.

December 16th, 1920.

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THE CHAPBOOK
~A Monthly Miscellany~
No. 20. February 1921

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